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SUBJECT: TWO NEWLY-APPOINTED CATHOLIC BISHOPS DISCUSS GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Two of the three new Vietnamese bishops named by the Vatican earlier in the summer recently met with the Consulate to share their positive experiences in overseeing Catholic communities in the southern part of the country. One of the two, Bishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, will be heading north to Phat Diem diocese in Ninh Binh province and will be replaced by Father Joseph Dinh Duc Dao, who is coming directly from the Vatican. The second bishop, Vu Duy Thong, will remain in the south, where he will take over Phan Thiet diocese in coastal Binh Thuan province. In their meetings with the Consulate, both bishops focused on taking care of their growing flocks and expanding social work activities while tactfully choosing to eschew discussion of recent land disputes in the North. End Summary.

A Northern Homecoming for Father Nang

¶2. (SBU) For Joseph Nguyen Nang, becoming Bishop of Phat Diem diocese in Ninh Binh province will be a sort of homecoming. His family, like many others, left Ninh Binh in 1954 after the country was partitioned and Catholics were encouraged to move south by former Republic of Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem. Bishop Nang acknowledged that moving to Phat Diem diocese, which has approximately 152,000 followers, will be a major change from Xuan Loc, which is home to around 846,000 Catholics. Bishop Nang said living standards in Phat Diem are still relatively low for most residents, so a major part of his mission will be to try and "improve socio-economic conditions" there. He also acknowledged that northern Catholics "continue to struggle," but steered clear of commenting on recent troubles in Vinh diocese.

¶3. (SBU) The opulence of the Xuan Loc Bishop's headquarters in Dong Ngai province where Bishop Nang received PolOff was a clear indication of the Catholic community's growth and prosperity in what became Vietnam's most Catholic region following the 1954 partition. The expansive complex was recently completed in 2008 and includes a seminary, a palatial residence and a pastoral center set amidst well-manicured gardens and marble statuary. Bishop Nang has been the rector of the seminary since 2006. The seminary currently has around 250 students engaged in a six-year course of study, with approximately 45 new seminarians and 45 graduates annually.

Expanding Social Work Through Caritas

¶4. (SBU) In addition to describing his role at the seminary, Bishop Nang discussed the diocese's expansion of social services for disaster relief victims, people living with HIV/AIDS, orphans, the homeless and the elderly. He proudly displayed a group photograph from a recent visit by international representatives of Caritas, the Catholic charity that re-established its presence in Vietnam in October 2008. Bishop Nang said he enlisted the Vatican's support to help build the new Caritas office in Ho Chi Minh City (scheduled to open this Fall) during his visit to the Vatican with Cardinal Man and fellow Bishops in June. Bishop Nang also said his appointment process went smoothly, having been completed in the relatively short time period of roughly four months. Once Bishop Nang moves to his new diocese in Ninh Binh on August 31, he will be replaced at the seminary by Father Joseph Dinh Duc Dao, who will be coming directly from the Vatican.

Bishop Thong Tends the Faithful in Phan Thiet

¶5. (SBU) In HCMC, PolOff met with newly appointed Bishop Vu Duy Thong, who has worked for over fifteen years as a professor of theology at the Catholic seminary here. Like its counterpart in Dong Nai, the HCMC seminary is set in a sylvan oasis in the heart of the city and has been recently refurbished with modern facilities, a large cultural center and a host of programs for parishioners. On the day of our meeting, the center was

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bustling with activity as over 1,000 altar boys from across the diocese participated in a day camp program.

¶6. (SBU) Bishop Thong cheerfully anticipated his August 31 transfer to coastal Binh Thuan province, where he will take up his new appointment as the Bishop of Phan Thiet diocese, a small but thriving Catholic community of approximately 155,000 parishioners, 59 parishes, 39 sub-parishes and 90 priests. Phan Thiet, which was founded in 1974, is the youngest diocese in southern Vietnam. Like Xuan Loc, many of Phan Thiet's parishioners are migrants from the North who arrived after 1954. (Note: Because the region was one of the areas to which many families with connections to the former government of South Vietnam were relocated after being expelled from HCMC following the war, a number of Catholics in the region probably arrived from 1974 to 1980. End Note.)

¶7. (SBU) Bishop Thong showed Poloff a photo album commemorating several special events in Phan Thiet, including the gathering of approximately 2000 Catholics on the 13th of each month to commemorate Our Lady of Fatima. (Note: The name is a reference to the reported appearance of the Virgin Mary to three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917, a celebrated Catholic miracle where the sun appeared to have "danced across the sky." End Note.) Bishop Thong said he would continue several charitable programs set up by retiring Bishop Nguyen Thanh Hoan, including a micro-credit program for poor residents to buy stock for animal husbandry and scholarships for poor but gifted children to attend school.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: While these Southern Catholic leaders are cautiously optimistic about the Church's continued expansion

under Vietnam's legal framework on religion, senior HCMC church leaders continue to cite property issues and difficulties in expanding social work initiatives as ongoing issues, though they do appear to have more leeway than their northern brethren when it comes to pushing the envelope. Lest you think southern Catholics less fiesty, you only need to turn to the nuns from the Congregation of the Lovers of the Thu Thiem Holy Cross, who recently refused to budge when the HCMC officials tried to move them to build a "multipurpose commercial area" on their land. Thus far, the authorities are respecting their stance.

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